

What if the Soviets Are Driven by Fear?

What are the Russians up to? The Economist of London concludes that the Soviets have gone into grumpy hibernation at least through the Chernenko era. White House aides say the Soviets are out to defeat President Reagan and some alarmists of both parties fear we are headed for war, cold or hot.

The evidence that the Soviets are up to *something* is overwhelming. In the past six months they have walked out of Geneva talks on strategic and intermediate-range

Viewpoint

by Morton M. Kondracke

missiles, pulled out of the Los Angeles Olympics and canceled a high-level diplomatic mission to China.

They have carried out large-scale naval maneuvers in the Caribbean and North Atlantic and have launched a major new offensive in Afghanistan that included unprecedented carpet-bombing of the Panjshir valley. They have installed new intermediate-range missiles in Eastern Europe and have moved more of their strategic-missile submarines near American coastlines.

The Soviets have continued their rearmament of Syria, sent their defense minister and 66 senior generals and admirals to conclude a multibillion-dollar arms deal with India and have closed another sale, reportedly valued at \$2.5 billion, with Iraq.

A Soviet-built MiG fired at a U.S. helicopter that strayed over the Czech border. The Soviets also have restricted civilian air corridors into West Berlin. And on two occasions, Soviet ships have bumped against U.S. naval vessels.

Internally, the Soviets have cracked down on dissidents, including physicist Andrei Sakharov and his wife, reduced Jew-

ish emigration and restricted mail and phone communications with the West.

All the while, they have taken every possible opportunity to denounce the Reagan administration and blame it for the breakdown of East-West relations.

Konstantin Chernenko on April 8 specifically denied that Soviet policy was directed toward the U.S. presidential election, but Soviet meddling in West German elections last year provides a precedent for disbelieving him.

If the Soviets are playing American politics, they are doing so just as badly as they did in Germany, and they are likely to help reelect President Reagan much as they helped install the Christian Democrats. Mr. Reagan will be only too happy to wrap himself in the flag, declare that Moscow (in addition to Havana, Managua and the Ayatollah) is against him and ask the electorate whom they prefer—them or him.

The Democrats as well are playing into Mr. Reagan's hands by implying that they agree with the Soviets that the U.S. is principally to blame for the chill in U.S.-Soviet relations.

When House Democrats voted against the MX missile and binary nerve gas—with presidential candidates Gary Hart and Walter Mondale urging them on—they also gave Mr. Reagan the opportunity to charge that his opposition was rewarding the Soviets for their refusal to take part in arms talks.

The conventional wisdom among Americans right now is that U.S.-Soviet relations will improve after November regardless of who wins. If a Democrat is elected, we'll be back to detente. If Mr. Reagan is re-elected, the Soviets will come back to negotiate because he is the only president America has.

But another theory worth considering is that internal crises in the Soviet Union have more to do with Soviet behavior than with the U.S. elections. If that's so, U.S.-

Soviet relations may remain tense for some time.

Recently published hearings of the Joint Economic Committee of Congress entitled "The Political Economy of the Soviet Union" suggest that the Soviet leadership faces nothing but woe in the years ahead—economic stagnation, the burgeoning of non-Russian minorities, a declining standard of living and an increasing inability to pay for the weaponry necessary to keep up with the U.S.

American Sovietologists who testified at the hearings—and also analysts at the CIA—do not believe that the Soviet economy is about to collapse, but they agree that Soviet growth rates are declining from the 3%-4% range of the 1970s to 2% for the 1980s.

I'm neither an economist nor a Sovietologist, but the experts' evidence suggests that Soviet growth rates actually may be flat or negative.

The CIA estimates that Soviet productivity has been declining at a rate of 0.8% a year and that the country's labor force will grow only 0.4% during the rest of this decade.

There are other signs of decline. According to Prof. Marshall Goldman of Wellesley College and Harvard, food is in short supply outside of the Moscow-Leningrad area and rationing has been imposed in 12 cities.

According to Prof. Murray Feshbach of Georgetown University, infant mortality in the Soviet Union is rising and life expectancy is falling. He also cited Soviet publications to demonstrate that alcoholism and abortion are rampant.

The Soviet Union has shown a seemingly endless capacity to squeeze its civilian sector to pay for military growth. If defense spending accounts for 12% or 13% of Soviet GNP, as most experts believe, then there is still room to squeeze, even in a declining economy.

Suppose, however, that the U.S. Defense

Intelligence Agency is right, and the military actually accounts for 36% of GNP. In a declining economy, the Soviet leadership has to fear that in the long run it won't be able to maintain its most successful activities—building weapons and using them to increase Soviet power and legitimacy.

If these hypotheses are correct, there would seem to be four basic courses left to the Soviets: (1) reform internally to become more productive; (2) seek true detente with the U.S.; (3) continue the present slow decline, and (4) strike quickly for some strategic prize (oil, for example) while their military position is still strong.

Reform seems out of the question as long as party hack Chernenko is in power. The Soviets seem to be in no mood for detente except on their own terms, which the U.S. specifically rejected after the Afghanistan invasion. The two remaining choices are most unpleasant, and the ordeal of deciding whether to decline or risk everything may account for Soviet surliness.

No American can know for sure what is going on inside the Kremlin, but if the Soviets are acting out of desperation, what should America do?

I think what we shouldn't do is scare them, squeeze them and try to defeat them, as President Reagan seems to be doing. We also shouldn't imply, as Democrats sometimes do, that the Soviets can hope for a return to the old style of detente that led to Soviet adventurism and American reaction.

In dealing with a frightened, fractious superpower, the best policy for the U.S. is one that is firm, consistent and available for fair bargaining. One of the best outlines for such a policy available today is Richard Nixon's new book, "Real Peace."

Mr. Kondracke is executive editor of the New Republic.